



# Syphilis

(Syph, The Pox)

### What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*.

### Who is at risk for syphilis?

Any sexually active person who comes in direct contact with a syphilis sore can be infected with syphilis. Since gonorrhea can also be spread by oral or anal sex, men who have sex with men are also at risk for infection.

### What are the symptoms of syphilis?

Syphilis infection can be divided into three stages. Many people infected with syphilis have unrecognized symptoms or do not have any symptoms for years. During the primary stage, symptoms may include one or more painless, firm sores (chancres) at the spot where syphilis entered the body (i.e., on the sex organs, anus or in the mouth). The sores last about three to six weeks and then heal without treatment. Syphilis still remains in the blood, however. During the secondary stage, about one to two months after the initial sores appear, a rash may develop anywhere on the body, and flu-like symptoms may appear. The symptoms of secondary syphilis eventually will resolve with or without treatment, but without treatment, the infection will progress to the latent and late stages of the disease. During the late stage, the infection can damage the brain, heart, nerves, eyes, blood vessels, liver, bones and joints. This damage may appear many years later.

### How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms can appear 10 to 90 days after exposure, but usually appear three weeks after exposure.

### How is syphilis spread?

Syphilis is spread through direct contact with a syphilis sore during vaginal, oral or anal sex. Syphilis also can be passed from an infected mother to her baby during pregnancy or at birth.

### When and for how long is a person able to spread the disease?

A person can spread syphilis when sores are present during the primary and secondary stages of the infection. Transmission of the infection after the first year is rare.

### How is a person diagnosed?

Blood tests are available to diagnose syphilis. Another laboratory test requires that a specimen be collected from a syphilis sore.

## **What is the treatment?**

Syphilis can be treated and cured with antibiotics. All sex partners should be tested and treated at the same time.

## **Does past infection make a person immune?**

No. A person can be reinfected after treatment.

## **Should adolescents or others be excluded from school, work or other activities if they have syphilis?**

Syphilis is primarily transmitted through sexual contact, so exclusion is usually not necessary. However, if sores occur in areas of the body that are exposed, the infected person should be excluded until 24 hours of treatment have been completed. In addition, the infected person should cover all sores with clothing, a bandage or an appropriate dressing.

## **What can be done to prevent the spread of syphilis?**

The most effective way to reduce the spread of syphilis is to abstain from sexual contact or to be in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and is known to be uninfected. Latex condoms, when used consistently and correctly, can reduce the risk of syphilis only when the infected areas are covered or protected by the condom. A latex condom should be used during vaginal and anal sex and for oral sex on the penis. A latex barrier should be used for oral sex on the vagina or anus. Additionally, to reduce the spread of infection, the number of sex partners should be limited, and a person should be tested if infection is suspected. Sex partners should be notified, tested and treated immediately if a person is infected.

## **Additional Information:**

Additional information is available at [www.ndhealth.gov/disease](http://www.ndhealth.gov/disease) or by calling the North Dakota Department of Health at 800.472.2180.

**This disease is a reportable condition. As mandated by North Dakota law, any incidence of this disease shall be reported to the North Dakota Department of Health.**

Resource: American Academy of Pediatrics. [Section 3, Summaries of Infectious Diseases]. In: Pickering LK, ed. *Red Book: 2003 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases*. 26<sup>th</sup> ed. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2003:[page 595]

